



Photo courtesy of Don Gilstrap

After running a roadblock and getting stuck, a stranded motorist on U.S. 26 east of Ririe speaks with a Bonneville County deputy, who sent him home with a big ticket.

District 6 joins in rescue effort

No one expected the 700 to 800 motorists stranded Feb. 8 and 9 in Swan Valley to be happy campers!

Blowing and drifting snow closed U.S. 26 between Swan Valley and Ririe just after lunch on Thursday, Feb. 7, and the severe conditions persisted into the weekend.

Traffic backed up more than a mile – both on U.S. 26 and on Idaho 31, which intersects U.S. 26 in Swan Valley – unable to proceed until Saturday afternoon. It didn't help that motorists from Wyoming kept coming, disregarding the road-closed-ahead warning in Alpine, Wyo., only to find that they had to stop at the barricade in Swan Valley.

Neither did it help that more motorists than usual wheeled down Idaho 31, hemmed in by the closure of Idaho 32 and 33 in Teton Valley to the north because of inclement weather there. All these roads were closed, making it impossible to go west.

By Friday afternoon, conditions worsened, and a protracted, cold night awaited the desperate travelers.

No five-star hotels

Swan Valley, population 235, has no five-star hotels. There isn't even a Motel 6 to leave the light on for you.

But there are the Granite Creek Guest Ranch, the South Fork Lodge, and the

(continued on page 4)

Braving the snow; adventures on 33

It's no Cadillac.

The snowplow, that is.

The roaring and vibration of the diesel-engine truck intimidate me.

The blade drops, and the scraping sound adds to the brutish symphony.

It's man fighting back against the first "normal winter" in years. And it's my first ride ever in this king of the road.

Inside the cab, the interior is black and Spartan. We're not talking touring comfort here.

My passage is compliments of Lyle Holden, foreman of Area 650, who bargains to drive me from Sugar City to Teton and back.

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Jack retires

John X. "Jack" Combo decided that 18 years on the state's Idaho Transportation Board was just about right. So he retired when his third term expired on Jan. 31.



Jack, 85, "effectively represented eastern Idaho and the state as a whole during his distinguished career," District 6 Engineer Tom Cole said. "He will be missed."

The district will recognize Jack and his family at a special ceremony in Rigby this spring.

Life and times of a snowplow operator

By Herb Drexler
Region 1 Maintenance Supervisor

You know you are a snowplow operator when:

- You can't find the road.
- Your plow disappears from in front of the truck.
- Your left window is now your windshield because your wipers can't keep up.
- Your window is open and you're freezing so you can keep the snow from sticking to the windshield.
- It's been hours since you saw a snow pole or delineator post.
- Your boss asks for your location and you have no idea.
- You're cold and wet, but you have finally dug your way back to the road.
- There's no way home today.
- You open presents the day after Christmas.
- You're standing on the brakes and the truck is still moving.
- Oncoming traffic runs you off the road.
- Your truck veers toward oncoming traffic because the plow blade bites into the snow floor.
- Cars pass you on both sides.
- Your truck lunges forward because someone hit you from behind.
- You hear a thud and know you've plowed something other than snow . . . a person, animal?
- You run into a ditch and get pulled out.
- Animals line up at night to watch you pass by.
- It's dark and snowballs look back at you.
- You go to bed and all you see is snowflakes.

Herb reminds motorists: The sure way to have an accident in any kind of weather is to hurry. So drive carefully.

This is the old Ririe Highway approximately two miles east of Ririe on Feb. 2. The scene, captured by photographer J. B. Harris, illustrates the challenges of winter maintenance during a storm. Courtesy of Buyer Bob Berthelson in Supply, the image sums up 2008.

10 Commandments for snowplow folks

By Kansas Transportation Department

1. Thou shalt present thyself to thy job physically and mentally fit, and properly clothed for any emergency.
2. Thou shalt never enter thy cab without inspecting thy lights and other safety equipment.
3. Thou shalt know thy spreading and plowing routes and thy plow-blade life.
4. Thou shalt remain alert to avoid all guardrails, signs, stalled cars, etc.
5. Thou shalt contain thy temper even though passed on both sides by traffic.
6. Thou shalt use thy radio as briefly as possible, so thy fellow workers can have access in an emergency.
7. Thou shalt interrupt the flow of power to thy spreader before attempting to free any foreign objects or blockages if thee treasure thy fingers.
8. Thou shalt render thy truck and spreader out of gear and stoutly set thy brakes before dismounting thy cab.
9. Thou shalt ever govern thy speed according to highway conditions.
10. Thou shalt mind thy manners on the roadway and clearly signal thine intentions.



TWIN FALLS POLICE DEPARTMENT

JAMES R. MUNN JR.
CHIEF OF POLICE

January 29, 2008

Special thanks to:

Devin Weaver
Sherril Weaver

Dean Berggren, Area Supervisor
Idaho Department of Transportation
P. O. Box 97
Rigby, ID 83442

Dear Supervisor Berggren:

I would like to express our appreciation for the exceptional work performed by your inspectors. On January 8, 2008, Inspectors Devon Weaver and Sherril Weaver assisted in the apprehension of Michael Malson. Mr. Malson has been the suspect in an extensive financial investigation by the Twin Falls Police Department. Incident to Malson's arrest, a 2005 Freightliner semi-truck valued at \$53,000 was recovered. The truck was stolen from Twin Falls Truck and Equipment.

Please extend our thanks to these fine inspectors for their exemplary attention to duty regarding this case. If you have any questions, please contact Detective Sergeant David Heidemann at (208) 735-7292.

Sincerely,

JAMES R. MUNN JR.
Chief of Police

MATTHEW HICKS
Captain, Criminal Investigation Division

DH:ead

Date: February 7, 2008
Subject: Snow Removal in Eastern Idaho
From: Cathy Koon [ckoon@co.fremont.id.us]
To: public-info@itd.idaho.gov
Cc: Bruce King; Tom Cole

Special thanks to:

Maintenance crews

I want to thank the maintenance crews in ITD District 6 for the great job they are doing under some truly awful conditions. We are having record-breaking snowfalls in this part of the state, and the men and women of District 6 have kept the roads open. It seems we have actually had fewer closures this year than in the past several years, despite the heavy and constant snow. I know they are putting in long hours, and I appreciate all they do. Tell them for me to ignore the "bad press." People seem to have forgotten what winter is really like in this neck of the woods. Welcome to Idaho.

Cathy Koon

St. Anthony, ID 83445

208-624-1548
CELL: 208-313-2025
ckoon@co.fremont.id.us

*"Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people."
Eleanor Roosevelt former first lady (1884-1962)*



Traffic backed up more than a mile on Idaho 31 north of Swan Valley and congregated at the general store (right of image) in town.

Storms turn travelers into lodging companions;

(continued from page 1)

Sleepy J Cabins (eight miles down the road in Irwin, population 155). The Saddle Sore Saloon and the South Fork Inn and Grill in Irwin also have a few rooms.

These establishments filled up in minutes.

Not to worry. With permission from ITD's Assistant District 6 Engineer Karen Hiatt, Homeland Security Officer Mike Clements at the District 6 office in Rigby proposed the "Swan Valley Mass Care, Feeding and Rescue Mission."

Here's how it played out:

Friday, 4:05 p.m.

Working with Mike Taysom, manager of Bonneville County's Emergency Services Department, Clements arranged a relief convoy of equipment and supplies to brave the elements for 27 miles from Ririe to Swan Valley.

Joining the rescue effort were the Red Cross, Eastern Idaho Public Health Department, Bonneville County Search & Rescue, and Madison County Sheriff's Office.

Key members of the team were Taysom, Lt. Bruce Bowler of the Madison County Sheriff's Office and Blaine Ball, supervisor of District 6's special maintenance crew.

The convoy included:

- A large V-plow truck from ITD's Rigby shed driven by Ball.
- A Bonneville County Search and Rescue truck pulling a 50-bed Red Cross shelter trailer.
- A Bonneville County Search and Rescue pickup pulling a 50-bed Red Cross shelter trailer, with an additional 50-bed capacity added.
- A Madison County pickup pulling a 50-bed capacity mobile hospital trailer, augmented with additional 50-bed supplies from the Bonneville County trailer, all courtesy of federal grants.
- An Idaho Bureau of Homeland Security pickup loaded with food for the rescue mission.

The town's "grocery store" is a service station-convenience store, with few supplies. While it offers the

community's famous square ice cream (ice cream extracted with a square scoop), the treat is more popular in August.

9:20 p.m.

The V-plow led the convoy east past the roadblock on U.S. 26 near Ririe, blasting through drifts higher than the pickup trucks and through other stretches of snow up to four feet deep for hundreds of yards, all in blizzard conditions that were at times complete whiteouts.

"I had a wind-speed meter, but Mike (Taysom) declined my offer to open the window and stick his arm out to capture the true wind speed," Clements reported.

11:30 p.m.

"It took us two hours to reach Swan Valley," Clements said. "We set up



A 50-bed Red Cross shelter trailer provided by Bonneville County Disaster Services.



Traffic backed up as much as 1.5 miles on U.S. 26, with travelers stuck in the line or in surrounding rural communities until Saturday.

ITD joins agencies, local citizens in rescue effort

the trailers at an LDS church, where volunteers were feeding motorists. We passed out blankets and cots.

“People were sleeping on the floor throughout the building. Shawn (of the Red Cross) counted 80 people, but knew he missed a number of them.

“We cooked chili and dispensed hot chocolate, then got to bed about 2 a.m.”

Saturday, 6 a.m.

Good morning Swan Valley!

“We checked on hundreds of motorists, who had slept in their cars,” Clements said. “Road and weather reports were discouraging.

“With Swan Valley residents, we served pancakes and hot chocolate at the church.”

8 a.m.

“ITD crews with rotaries and other equipment speculated the road might be ready for an evacuation convoy at 9 a.m.,” Clements said. “We posted this information at the shelter and distributed it to motorists in their vehicles.

“Motorists started lining up at 8:30 a.m., but at 9 o’clock ITD reported little progress.

“Mike (Taysom) and I provided updates to the long lines of vehicles on U.S. 26 and Idaho 31. “We counted 248 vehicles, with 450



Volunteers set up cots in the LDS church.

people, then 300 vehicles with 500 people – then we gave up counting.”

Swan Valley Mayor Ann Walsh said one of her friends counted 418 vehicles, many with more than one occupant.

“Most of the people were thankful for the updates,” Clements said.

Noon

Idaho State Police and Bonneville County deputies arrived “from the outside world” and reported a path was open, Clements said. “Evacuations began, with motorists honking and cheering like fans at a victory celebration,” he said.

Epilogue

“We left the 100-bed Red Cross shelter trailer and surplus food at the

church in case it is needed again this winter,” Clements said.

“We sent the 50-bed Red Cross shelter trailer to Driggs in case of another emergency there,” he said. Severe weather has already isolated Driggs a couple of times this winter.

Lieutenant Bruce Bowler returned Madison County’s trailer to Rexburg after the team helped him restock it.

“Our plan worked,” Clements said.

“We served the public and proved our planning assumptions.

“It was a good learning opportunity – in a surreal and hard work sort of way.

“I wish to thank ITD, whose cooperation, equipment and manpower made this mission possible,” Clements said.

ITD Emergency Program Manager Bryan D. Smith in Boise also thanked District 6 for facilitating the rescue effort. He noted the district found time to help these motorists while trying to reopen a total of eight routes in eastern Idaho closed by the winter storms.

ITD Chief Engineer Steve Hutchinson e-mailed District 6 Engineer Tom Cole to say: “Thanks to you and the crew. Let them know how much all of your efforts are appreciated.”

U.S. 26 reopened on Saturday, Feb. 9, at 2:45 p.m.■

Braving the snow in rare ‘normal winter’ of 2008;

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Unassuming and courteous, Lyle is easy to like.

The first stretch of Idaho 33 from U.S. 20 to the road closure sign in Newdale is snow- and ice-covered, but non-threatening, especially in the quiet of the morning.

But the highway east of Newdale is different. Plowed only two hours earlier, it is now streaked with snowdrifts two feet deep. This stretch of Idaho 33 is always a problem during winter storms.

We bump along, with snow from the plow baptizing the whole cab.

Lyle surprises you when he reaches around his window post to clean his windshield wiper blade mid-motion.

Along the way, we stop to talk with Kent Holden, Lyle's older brother, and Mike Van Wagner, who skipper a rotary (big truck with gigantic snow blower) and other snowplow, respectively.

Near the junction of Idaho 32 and 33, we meet Tracy Whitmore of the Driggs maintenance crew. She is patrolling Teton Valley.

We turn around and head back into the wind. After five miles, the breeze becomes a gale.

At the top of a hill, the scene reminds you of a dust storm on *Lawrence of Arabia*, only the panorama is white not brown.

It is easy to see why they close roads.

We make it back.

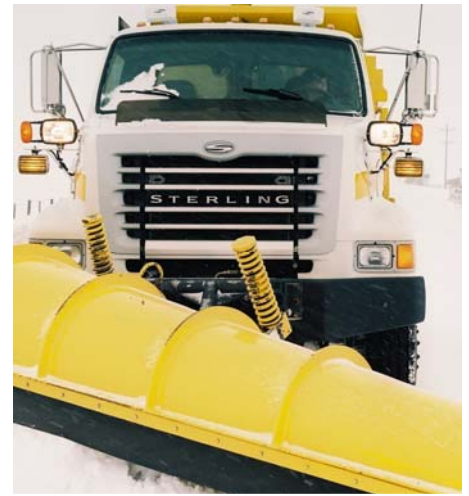
Roadblock

Days pass and the phone rings in Rigby. It's Region 1 Engineer Wade Allen, with a roadblock assignment. Be at the Sugar City shed at 3 a.m. tomorrow – Saturday.

Names of folks at the Rigby office appear on a list of “volunteers” for roadblock duty during storms.



Lyle Holden, foreman of Area 650.



ITD snowplow . . . king of the road.



Looking west at the roadblock near the junction of Idaho 32 and 33 on Jan. 29.

My body objects, but I make it to the shed at 2:29 the next morning. The building is aglow, with a snowplow idling out front. The rest of the world slumbers, but the shed is alive, rarely closing during this type of winter.

After fueling the port-of-entry pickup that I will drive, Lyle wheels out of the yard in this snowplow with me tailgating him.

Our first stop is the roadblock in Newdale, where Project Manager Troy Williams sits guard in his pickup.

I'm surprised, but happy to see him. After all, he's family (see May 2007 issue, p. 5).

“It's been quiet,” Troy says.

We venture into the open country of potato and grain fields fast asleep under a heavy blanket of snow.

Until now, the weather has been still and the road free of drifts. But here the wind is blowing and snow cover is building.

Your anticipation that the road will reopen by daybreak fades.

adventures on Idaho 33 in snowplow, on roadblock

Halt. Before us lies hundreds of yards of highway – or what used to be highway – buried in snow up to five feet deep. You will never doubt the decision to close a road again.

The ‘V’

Lyle pushes ahead as best he can, but soon says we’ll have to wait for a “V,” which is a road grader fitted with a huge V-shaped blade.

Rick Davis of the Sugar City crew presently rolls past and dives into an ocean of white.

The V has what it takes, although even it bogs down after 25 or 30 feet. Again and again, Rick backs up and lunges into the mountains of snow, finally breaking through to a shallower snow floor.

Our destination is the roadblock at the Idaho 32-33 intersection, which I am to host till 3 p.m.

Unexpectedly, my cell phone sings. It’s Ken Hahn. But the connection fails.

Halfway between Newdale and Teton, you realize you are in a wilderness.

Junction

As you reach the junction, the sun rises. Soon, everyone leaves, and you are alone in the world.

A motorist approaches, and you feel empowered.

“The roads are closed and unfortunately will be until at least midnight,” I say.

“But U.S. 26 south of Victor is scheduled to reopen by mid-afternoon,” I add.

The driver takes hope.

The morning becomes day and more motorists arrive.

You feel increasingly important.

You get good at stating the road looks fine as far as you can see it, but “on the other side of those foothills,



Lead Worker Tracy Whitmore.

snowdrifts up to four feet deep stretch over the road for hundreds of yards.”

For travelers who inquire after Idaho 32, you delight in explaining that the first 15 miles toward Ashton is passable, but then you smack into a six-foot deep snowdrift.

Voyagers

Two carpenters desperate to reach home after three days stuck in Driggs turn back, resigned to their fate.

A well-to-do couple from California heads back to Targhee for “more skiing.” The novelty of the situation intrigues them.

One man and woman from Washington, D.C., “need to get to Spokane.” I show them the route to U.S. 26 via Idaho 31 on their map and they speed back to Driggs.

A man in his early-twenties, sporting a beard, low-hanging hair and ski rack atop his Audi, arrives from Swan Valley, where someone said Idaho 33



On Idaho 32 above Idaho 32-33 junction.

was open. He accepts my edict, and motors back.

To my satisfaction, most of the voyagers believe we are just trying to keep them safe.

Afternoon

Given the uniqueness of it all, the afternoon comes too quickly. Yet you notice hunger pangs.

Suddenly, Tracy appears with an offer to spell you off. Her thoughtful gesture enables you to get some lunch in Teton.

At 4:30 p.m., Lyle arrives with your replacement – Region 1 Staff Engineer Tracy Bono, who is also new to the Idaho Transportation Department.

Before returning to Sugar City, I drive to Victor to tie up the road closure sign on Idaho 31 for Lyle, who wants to let his crew there keep sleeping.

By the time I return and start west in Lyle’s tracks, I am worried, because it has been two hours since he “reopened” the 24-mile sled trail (Idaho 33) with his blade.

Surely, the drifts would not have built up yet?

Nerves

Halfway to Newdale, my knuckles are white and my nerves frazzled as I bust through foot-deep drifts at 50 mph, not daring to slow down for fear of getting drawn down and stopped. I grip the steering wheel trying to stay within the narrow passageway carved out by Rick and Lyle.

The relentless wind deposits new snow by the inch.

I thank my maker for the long chassis and heavy construction of the port-of-entry truck, which provides weight for crashing through the snow banks.

I am relieved to reach Newdale, where the wind subsides.

You become a believer. ■

— Bruce King



Photo courtesy of Kirk Finn

Beautiful but dangerous

Perhaps no stretch of highway in eastern Idaho is more challenging to maintain than the 4.5-mile long Ashton Hill, where winter storms can drop 6 inches of snow in 30 minutes. But Area Foreman Ron Atchley and crews keep at it.

Comings and Goings at District 6

Joining the district are Scott Trubl, transportation technician senior (TTS) in Region 1, and Ken Hess, rehired as transportation technician in Island Park.

Promotions are Karl Martin to transportation technician principal (TTP) in Region 1.

Transfers are Mitch Walters, a lateral move from Island Park maintenance to the special maintenance crew; Rick Davis from Sugar City maintenance to the special maintenance crew; and Ryan Wright from Region 1 to Island Park maintenance.

Retirements are Blaine Ball, 37 years, and Lynn Meikle, 21 years, both of the special maintenance crew.

Open positions include one transportation technician apprentice each in

Island Park, Sugar City and Driggs; a TTP in the special maintenance crew; and two TTSs in Region 1.

New babies are Azelynn Jones, daughter of Sheldon Jones of Arco maintenance, who was born Feb. 8.

Employee loses wife

Mike Taylor of Region 2 lost his wife Kathy, who died suddenly at home on March 7.

Memorial services were held at Eckersell Memorial Chapel in Rigby on March 12, with farewell services in Elk River.

Condolences from District 6 to Mike and his family on this difficult loss.

MOU meeting

Environmental Planner Tim Cramer participates in the annual district MOU meeting (Memorandum of Understanding discussion) on March 4 in the Rigby D-6 office.



This is a meeting with officials of the Idaho Department of Water Resources to discuss and request immediate approval for routine maintenance that affects the beds and banks of regional stream channels.

Present were D-6 environmental and maintenance personnel.